

SUBTERRANEA BRITANNICA
SECRETARY'S NEWSLETTER NO. 1
MAY 1988

Sub. Brit. is Alive and Well!

In the long absence of a Bulletin or even a newsletter Sub. Brit members may well be wondering if the producers have met with a collective underground calamity. In fact a small part of the delay with the Bulletin was indeed due to Sylvia being laid up with a broken foot and other injuries. However she has almost recovered now and the Bulletin was really held up by other production difficulties which we hope to overcome for the next issue but meanwhile if you have any suggestions about economic printing or anything else to do with the Bulletin please let me know. Even better send Sylvia a note of sympathy - its been a very frustrating period for her.

As regards the newsletter which is normally produced by our chairman Paul, perhaps you should write to your MP for Paul is a school teacher and as we have all heard teachers (and pupils) are presently overloaded with a new examination system. Do not despair I understand a bumper edition of Paul's newsletter is on its way but meanwhile your secretary has taken it upon himself to produce a somewhat less learned substitute.

Day Conference and AGM

The AGM and associated Day Conference was held at the usual venue of Lucy Cavendish College Cambridge on 17th of October - two days after the Great Storm and the Stock Exchange crash. The secretary had his problems too, because almost at the last minute all his speakers except Adrian Pearce found it impossible to attend. Nevertheless Maureen Mahoney and the secretary himself stepped into the breach. Maureen talked on the underground of Nottingham and the secretary's talk which will eventually appear in print was on his personal researches into the history of the use of underground space for growing mushrooms. Adrian gave a thoroughly entertaining talk and demonstrated his wide knowledge of Britain's metalliferous mines - all gained by first hand adventurous experience.

The AGM itself produced little surprise the only committee change being that a conscience stricken secretary persuaded the assembly that his wife, Barbara, should be made joint secretary.

Day Conference March 26th 1988

This Spring Day Conference at the Royal School of Mines Imperial College was very well attended. It started with a talk by Professor Alan Grierson who is the Crown Estate Mineral Agent and has spent all his life with mines and is now theoretically retired. He explained that the laws connected with mining rights in Britain are very complex indeed and can be traced far back into history. Eventually the Crown established a right to a percentage of the profits of mining operations but one of our improvident Monarchs traded off these rights to the government in exchange for the annual Civil

List. This was a bad deal for the Royal Family who today get far less out of the Civil List than the Government get from mining royalties .

It is one of Professor Grierson's present jobs (remember in retirement!) to assess the amount of royalties payable from each mining operation in Britain. Obviously he had an immense amount of experience to draw upon in his talk which was entitled "Mining Reflections" and it was delivered with such enthusiasm and eloquence that the fascinated audience encouraged him to run over time.

We were fortunate also to get Mr. H.D. (Denzil) Jones to come all the way from Doncaster. He is the recently retired H.M. Deputy Chief Inspector of Mines, an occupation which requires courage as well as diplomacy and much expertise.

Nevertheless he confessed to being somewhat unnerved by the title of the talk " A Guide to Survival " which Sub. Brit. had saddled him with. This did not, as it turned out, prevent him from delivering another splendid talk which was once again based on a life times experience. As regards ones personal safety I suppose each member of the audience made their own personal mental notes depending on what sort of underground structures they spent most of their time exploring. This writer became very alerted to the dangers of methane which always accumulates in refuse tips. Abandoned underground structures are often close to such tips. Apart from this methane is to be found everywhere there is decaying vegetation and can form pockets in the ceilings of underground structures.

Mr. Jones also pointed out that carrying a stick to test the soundness of roofs is useful - an idea which provoked some smiles while at a deeper level it was taken quite seriously.

The afternoon was firstly taken up by Sub. Brit's own Phil. Marshall describing an amazing solo canoe trip down the river Frome under Bristol. Those who participated in the Bristol Study Weekend some years ago will remember being taken through a little open doorway in the middle of Bristol to catch a glimpse of this river.

We are indebted to Mr. M. C. Black for procuring the first two speakers of the day and it was he himself who gave the last talk on Mithraism; a religion very involved with the underground. This talk stimulated a remarkable amount of discussion.

In brief communications Peter Burgess talked about recent research in East Surrey and produced some pieces of sulphur found in the stone mines at Godstone in Surrey and hypothesied that sulphur was burned as a sterilising agent during the mushroom growing days at Godstone. Has anyone got any better ideas?

Roger Morgan spoke on the Wartime "Aspidisdra" project. There is an underground radio station near Crowborough in Sussex, used for BBC overseas broadcasts but quite recently for sale. It was constructed during World War Two with the idea of overwhelming authentic Nazi broadcasts and replacing them with misleading alternatives.

Another feature of the day was Paul Sowan advertising with demonstration his incredible collection of files. A possibly unrivaled assembly of knowledge of the underground which he can be persuaded to share with anyone interested. Please write.

New Members

The Spring Day Conference coincided with a unique event in Sub. Brit's history - an article about us in the "The Guardian" by Jonathon Sale and was also followed up with a Radio broadcast by Roger Morgan. These two events conspired to cause the secretary to be swamped with many enquiries; a happy circumstance but one which has now given the secretary considerable practice in replying to letters over a lengthy period of time. The result is a number of new members to whom a very warm welcome is given.

New members this year are;

Yvonne England
Alfred Grandjean
Dr. D.J.R. Martin
Roger Bourgein
Anthony Aked
C.J.Fletcher
Dave Bicker
Jonathan Maisey
Veronica Thornton
P.F.Henderson
B.L.Morgan
Ian Walker
John Irwin

In case I have forgotten someone I hereby apologise and if they ring me up I will make an especially abject apology and make amends in the next newsletter and/or at the next bar I run into them.

(Incidentally Barbara and I always welcome phone calls but our chairman, Paul, welcomes letters.)

What is disappointing is that less people have joined than might be expected from the number of replies sent out. What does this mean? Does the secretary write off-putting letters? Does "The Guardian" project romantic illusions about Sub. Brit.? Does Sub. Brit. project a stuffy image of itself? To these and most other questions the secretary has no answers but he would like to say this to those on the brink of joining:-

Although Sub. Brit. hopes to establish the study of the underground as a recognised branch of Archaeology most members just enjoy the sheer fun of poking about underground places with kindred spirits.

Advice to New Members and a Reminder to Others

Sub. Brit. members are expected to provide themselves with helmets and lamps for underground trips. It is also useful to have a boiler suit to hand although this, except on rare occasions, is by no means essential. If however you develop the habit of exploring mines (it can become obsessive

after the first experience) you will need for safety reasons to purchase proper caving lamps, clothes and helmets.

The shop to contact is,

Caving Supplies Ltd
19 London Road
Euxton
Derbyshire SK17 9PA Tel: (0298) 5040

Whats Been Going On

In East Surrey

Sub. Brit members in East Surrey are nearly all members of the local caving club Unit Two Cave Research and Exploration. What is true of one organisation is also true for the other in this region although Unit Two should be regarded as the driving force.

This weather last winter was not good for the stability of the local stone mines and the most important entrance at Merstham (Bedlams Bank) suffered a calamitous collapse. Work is currently in progress to engineer a sound entrance.

Most of the underground at Merstham is a series of virtually intact medieval stone quarries - an archaeological monument of probably unique value. We were alarmed by a business proposal by a local landowner to construct a Dry Ski slope over part of the series and it is still a cause for concern since, although the council has rejected the application an appeal against the rejection is pending.

Undoubtably the saddest thing that has happened in Surrey is the filling of the extensive series of sand workings under Reigate. ("The Reigate Caves.") There are still vestiges left and anyone who wishes to visit the underground sites at Reigate will still find much to interest them but it is only during the last week or two that an interesting large cavern under the A25, behind D.H.Croft has been filled. Those who attend the Day conference at Cambridge on Oct 29th will hear the whole story of the infilling of the Reigate caves from the engineer in charge himself. This will complement a previous Day Conference lecture when Dr. Smith of The Royal School of Mines described the surveying of these systems.

In Kent

The Kent Underground Research Group is the force behind underground research in that region and recently has acquired added vitality by the arrival of Adrian Pearce from the North. One of his current projects is excavating at Archers Wood (actually over the boarder in East Sussex) where there was once an underground limestone quarry. Rediscovery of this mine would be a most exciting event and Adrian requires volunteer workers!

KURG's most recent newsletter makes interesting reading and cannot possibly be summarised in this newsletter. Sub. Brit members are encouraged to borrow it and other KURG publications from the secretary of Sub. Brit (me) by sending a large SAE. (30p)

Sub. Brit. is also keeping an eye on the new Channel Tunnel workings and Barbara Tadd is investigating a well at Sundridge near Westerham.

In Sussex

Is anyone especially fascinated with defunct underground Radar Stations? Some of us have recently visited one at Beachy Head near Eastbourne and another at Wartling which is near Pevensey also on the South Coast. One of our newest members, Dave Bicker, has also developed a special interest in the installation at Watnell near Nottingham. Some Sub. Brit. members will recall visiting it on a Study weekend a few years ago.

It is rumoured that the Beachy Head installation will be opened to the Public as it is owned by the local Council. Unfortunately the Wartling station is on private property and access is extremely controlled.

It appears that the former Radio Station at Crowborough previously mentioned in this newsletter has been purchased by a high security government agency thereby dashing all hopes of visiting it.

In Nottinghamshire

One of the people who responded to The Guardian article kindly sent two interesting cuttings from local newspapers in Burton. One (Burton Mail, 16.2.88) refers to a cellar found while restoring "the oldest former farmhouse in Burton town centre". It is not large and probably not older than the eighteenth century but it is pleasing to report that the business concerned with the restoration and future use of the premises intends to preserve the cellar and allow interested people to visit it.

The second cutting from the Burton Trader 30.3.88 refers to the landlord of the Thurland Hall in Nottingham who has discovered a network of caves under his premises. Not unsurprisingly Sub. Brit's own Alan MacCormick of the Castle Museum was consulted. Perhaps Alan will tell us about it at the next Day Conference?

In Norfolk

There have been some fairly recent TV reports of collapses in Norfolk one of which trapped a bus! Perhaps our Norfolk member could tell us about this one?

Sub. Brit. and Industrial Archaeology

Since Industrial Archaeological interests include such things as mines and railway tunnels members of Sub. Brit often find themselves involved with various IA organisations. In this cause we found ourselves displaying photographs (by Nick Catford) and literature at last autumn's annual AIA (The Association for Industrial Archaeology) conference at Bath. In March we did the same thing at Surrey University for the SERIAC (South Eastern Regional Industrial Archaeology Conferences) meeting on extractive industries. In fact two of our members were on the organising committee and in addition Paul Sowan gave one of the lectures and also in conjunction with Unit Two CRE we conducted a tour of the Godstone underground stone quarries following the lectures.

Nick Catford has also applied his photographic talents to recording the death of the extensive Fullers Earth works in East Surrey. These historically important industrial installations are now in the process of demolition.

Sub. Brit members should note that we are affiliated to AIA and receive their literature. A SAE to the secretary will enable you to borrow.

Exchange Newsletters

While on the subject of borrowing we draw members attention to some of the interesting exchange newsletters we receive and suggest that they avail themselves. (Remember an SAE to the secretary.)

Dudley Canal Trust.	Grampian Speleological Society
Fortress Study Group	Kent Underground Research Group
Railway and Canal Historic Soc.	South Wilts Industrial Archaeology
Stafford Speleology Soc.	Surrey Industrial History Group
Sussex Ind. Arch. Soc.	Unit Two Cave Research
Croydon Nat. Hist. and Scientific Soc.	

For those who can cope with other tongues we receive several rewarding journals from France, Belgium, West Germany and the Netherlands.

Autumn Day Conference 1988 and AGM.

This will be held on 29th October at the usual pleasant venue of Lucy Cavendish College Cambridge. Keith Bullerwell will be talking about engineering experiences with the Reigate "caves" and Harry Pearman will be talking on recent discoveries in South East England. A third speaker has yet to be booked.

Next Newsletter

As usual contributions are invited for the next newsletter and it is expected that these will be mainly news cuttings and the like. The secretary would also like to record more of members (or even non-members) personal discoveries. These may range from very brief notes on highly organised field trips or a mention of things noticed on Sunday afternoon strolls. I hope to acknowledge contributions individually.

Readers who have reached this point will be wondering whether to send their contributions to the chairman or to the secretary. I, as secretary, can only point out that a copy of anything sent to me will be passed to Paul and is therefore likely to be published in either a secretary's or a chairman's newsletter. I am not proposing to ask Paul to do the same for me because I only intend to produce a separate (two in one is a possibility) newsletter when pressure of work prevents Paul from producing one.

Did You See?

A BBC TV programme in the series, 'Secret Services' was about the Manchester sewers. I have a video if anyone wants to see it.